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Moturoa black gold – ‘the good oil’

by Sorrell Hoskin



Pioneer prospectors: Carter, Smith and MacDonald. Image: Waihi Museum



The world's first successful oil well was discovered in 1858 in California. A year later, Edwin Drake struck oil at Titusville, Pennsylvania, United States.

On the other side of the world in remote New Plymouth, New Zealand, early settlers were complaining about the oily scum on Ngamotu Beach that required them to wipe their boots and lift their dresses when they walked along the sand.

Rainbow hued slicks often covered the water around the Sugar Loaf Islands and local Maori told of an atua (spirit) who drowned there and was still undergoing decomposition.

Oil (otherwise known as petroleum) was literally flowing off the beach - but it wasn't until 1865 that anything was done about it.

That year, gunsmith Edward M. Smith collected samples from around the rocks at Ngamotu Beach and sent them off to England for analysis. The results came back positive - it was petroleum!

Around the same time the Taranaki Provincial Government ran an advertisement in the Taranaki Herald offering a reward of 400 (pounds) for 'the discovery of a spring of petroleum sufficiently copious to be profitably worked'.

Tags for this Story

Oil
(<http://pukeariki.com/Learning-Research/Taranaki-Research-Centre/Taranaki-Stories?tag=Oil>)

Pick axes and shovels - the Alpha well

Three men, John Reginald Scott, John Smith, and a Mr MacDonald, began prospecting on the beach in late June 1865. But the trio didn't have experience or permission and ran into Government red tape.

It wasn't just the Government who were causing problems - in letters to the Taranaki Herald locals voiced concern that the men were inexperienced and didn't have enough capital to provide necessary safety if the oil was to catch alight.

Josiah Flower Carter - a local publican - joined the trio and became financier and spokesperson. Soon a flurry of letters flowed to the Taranaki Herald defending the men.

"One of the trio is a practical miner of 18 years experience... and discoverer of a paying gold field...the other two are men of some 13 years mining experience in Australia and New Zealand. They had heard of the supposed mineral wealth of the area ...and come here to look for same...little dreaming that the Government of New Plymouth would provide an exception to the other provinces and would rather throw cold water upon their endeavour."

The group were finally granted a lease and serious work began in late 1865.

Andrew Ross, a further partner, joined the quartet at a later date.

Using picks and shovels they dug an exploratory well in a spot near the landward end of the Breakwater at Port Taranaki. The painstakingly slow hand digging process took several months. When they got deeper a tripod/derrick was erected over the hole. A cage lowered workmen and brought up spoil. The derrick was optimistically signposted 'To oil or London'.

In January 1866 New Plymouth settlers heard 'electrifying' news - oil had been found!

But there was a problem - six metres down the men had come across a pocket of natural gas - overcoming and hospitalising one of the diggers. A wind sail was rigged to help ventilate the shaft.

The news on the oil strike was a little premature - the men had found some seepage but not a lot else.

Some locals were still against the project as an advertisement in the February Taranaki Herald placed by Josiah shows:

"Whereas some evil despot person did between the hours of 6pm Friday and 6am Saturday wilfully damaged the fan and other working gear in connection with the petroleum works at the Sugar Loaves. 20 Pound Reward for information leading to their arrest."

Two months later the 'Alpha' well was down to 20 metres and a small flow of oil was being collected.

The Taranaki Herald reported: "This oil is thick and of greenish colour. It has the genuine oil smell, but not as strong as the purified oil."

But the bottom of the shaft became too dangerous for manual digging and a water drill was brought up from Nelson.

Taranaki Oil - The Good Oil

Word of 'Taranaki Oil' was spreading and the Herald reported on a Nelson chemist who had distilled the oil and used it in his lamps. "It compares favourably with American oil providing a strong and steady light."

Now oil had been found, New Plymouth people began to get behind the project. Enthusiastic letters were written to the editor with one writer claiming New Plymouth was on to a good thing: 'the darker the oil the more plentiful it is'.

T.Kelly from the Taranaki Institute wrote: "I see no reason to date that we will not see locomotives driven by its aid north and south, and the waters of our future harbour at the Sugar Loaves ploughed by vessels whose engine motive powers are generated by its combustion."

Oil Rush

By May the beach along the Sugar Loaves was dotted with wells as local businessmen began drilling, spurred into action by an application from a Melbourne company. The oil rush was on!

Taranaki Petroleum and People's Petroleum raised money by offering shares to the public. People's Petroleum named their first well Victoria as a tribute to the Queen.

End of the Alpha Well

Neither of the drilling companies enjoyed success and by the end of 1866 the Alpha Co was running out of money. It sold up to locally owned Taranaki Petroleum Co and the original oil pioneers disappeared off the oil 'map'.

The Alpha well proved to be a dud, producing only three barrels of oil (in a crude state) before the new owners decided to abandon it.

By December 1866 the paper was running editorials on 'the vagaries of petroleum' and enthusiasm had fallen. Petroleum was proving difficult to find, and when it was struck it showed a first flush before fading into nothing.

Another well - the Beta - showed promise but produced barely enough to grease the machinery. Money ran out and the company wound up in 1868.

The gush of oil enthusiasm waned and it was 20 years before any further real interest was shown in the Moturoa field.

In 1889 the Samuel Syndicate brought in experienced drillers from Canada. Nine wells were drilled along the foreshore with no.3 well the most successful. But again enthusiasm and finances dropped and the company folded in 1901.

Cow Eclipsed By The Bore?

In 1905 the Moturoa Petroleum Co's Birthday Well (apparently named such because it was 'spudded' on the manager's birthday) blew out impressive amounts of oil and gas.

Oil fever once again hit New Plymouth, the town went crazy and share prices in oil rocketed. Derricks dotted the beach as fourteen new companies were formed and bold statements were made by members of the public: "It is not too much to expect that the cow will be eclipsed by the bore" declared the Hawera Star in 1910.